IDENTITY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A NONCAPITALIST ECONOMY IN MILWAUKEE’S RIVERWEST NEIGHBORHOOD

by Trey Schiefelbein

This thesis focuses on the neighborhood of Riverwest in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a particularly diverse inner-city neighborhood in the nation’s most segregated city, and how the neighborhood has transformed into a noncapitalist project. It argues that neighborhood identity acts as a catalyst for the territorialization of alternatives to capitalism. Riverwest’s sizable and left-leaning activist community, and how it has constructed a particularly unique economy, were observed using semi-structured interviews and participatory research methods. Cooperatively run businesses and non-hierarchical community centers receive a deal of attention, as well as how they contribute to the neighborhood’s noncapitalist economy. The future of the neighborhood is then thrown into question as racial tensions came to a boil in the summer of 2011, and as the processes of gentrification begin to take hold.
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1. Look to Wisconsin

1.1 “Early Spring for the Badger”: Wisconsin’s Activist Turn

In November 2010, conservative politician and former executive of Milwaukee County Scott Walker was elected governor of the traditionally left-leaning state of Wisconsin. Just over one month after his inauguration, Governor Walker proposed a number of controversial policies under the guise of austerity and debt reduction, which became known as the now infamous Budget-Repair Bill. Perhaps the most contentious aspect of this bill was the planned stripping of all public sector workers’ collective bargaining rights, and soon it was “Early spring for the badger” (Anonymous, 2011). On March 12, 2011, the Saturday after the collective bargaining law had been passed, 100,000 protesters gathered at the Wisconsin state capitol in a last ditch effort to voice their opposition to Walker’s policies (Sulzberger, 2011). Even before the protests had reached such a massive scale, conservative radio and TV host Glenn Beck declared that the protests in Wisconsin were “the beginning of the American insurrection” (Beck, 2011); no doubt an allusion to the writings of the anarchist collective known as the Invisible Committee, whose book *The Coming Insurrection* (2009) received much attention from Beck as being “the most evil thing I have ever read” (Flood, 2010).

So, what then might this American insurrection look like? Apparently not like an insurrection at all. For one, it would be nowhere near as violent as Beck would lead people to believe, and it certainly has been a peaceful struggle relying both on traditional electoral politics and more experimental methods of grassroots organization among the Left. Despite the violent opposition to austerity found in countries like Greece and England, the resistance struggle in the United States, and especially Wisconsin, has taken a nonviolent approach to challenging hegemonic forms of political and economic power. This is especially true in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and its neighborhood of Riverwest; a neighborhood which has garnered national attention from the popular political blog *The Daily Kos* for its political activism (noise of rain, 2011). From homes to businesses, resistance against Governor Walker remains visible and strong, and residents have turned to each other for help in times of economic austerity.
As a former industrial city a large immigrant population, Milwaukee has historically been host to the politics of the far left. In 1910 the city elected its first socialist mayor, Emil Seidel, becoming the largest American city to ever do so. Seidel was followed intermittently by two other socialists, with the last of whom leaving office in 1960 (Gurda, 1999). Though the influence of the left has dissipated with regards to the formal workings of urban politics, a small but strong movement of anti and noncapitalists continue to organize in the city’s political margins. Despite the movement’s collectively small size, it should not be overlooked as many have argued that a plurality of small and local alternatives to liberal democracy and capitalism must exist in order to create a more just and egalitarian society (Gibson-Graham, 2006a, 2006b; Hardt & Negri, 2005; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Pickerill & Chatterton, 2006). This multiplicity of alternatives, or the multitude, can “crack” the structure of the society they seek to change from within, and then create something new in its place (Holloway, 2010).

This thesis argues that grassroots organizations of the Left territorialize alternatives to capitalism across space, particularly at the neighborhood level, as a result of a shared sense of belonging and moral obligation to one another. These alternatives have partially come as a
response to times of economic uncertainty, and they have been useful in helping citizens meet
some of their most basic needs. I conducted my research in the neighborhood of Riverwest in
Milwaukee, Wisconsin; a neighborhood viewed from both outside and in as hosting an
exceptionally progressive and politically active population. As Milwaukee was hit by the forces
of deindustrialization felt across the Rust Belt, residents of Riverwest have taken it upon
themselves to construct their own economy that in many ways runs counter to the capitalist
system that has left them behind. However, before delving into the question of how activists in
Milwaukee are working to create a more utopian, or “impossible” city (Chatterton, 2010),
Milwaukee’s history must first be explored.

1.2 Race, Place, and Politics in Milwaukee
In historian John Gurda’s authoritative book on the history of Milwaukee, the author describes
the city’s national reputation in the early twentieth century as being defined by the hallmarks of
“Germanism, Socialism, and beer” (1999, p. vii). Indeed, the Germans were the largest and most
significant group of immigrants to settle in Milwaukee, and during the first half of the 20th
century they helped to create a powerful socialist municipal government that could only be found
in Milwaukee. As I will argue in this thesis, a shared sense of belonging, one that brings people
together as neighbors and victims of the economic crisis, has led residents of Milwaukee’s
Riverwest neighborhood to explore economic alternatives to capitalism just as the city has done
in the past. Even though the significance of each of these “hallmarks” has waxed and waned over
the years, particularly the German identity and socialist politics, Gurda states that they have
influenced a “thoroughly distinctive” sense of place that continues to be felt today.

The first German immigrants arrived in Milwaukee during 1839, and for the next two
decades an average of more than 1,000 Germans settled in Milwaukee each week (Jones, 2009,
p. 15). Because of this large influx, Milwaukee had developed into a distinctly German city
rather than an American one. In fact, as one immigrant noted in a letter home, “Milwaukee is the
only place in which I found that Americans concern themselves with learning German, and
where the German language and German ways are bold enough to take a foothold (John Kerler,
Jr. as cited in Gurda, 1999, p. 65).” The “German ways” could be found across the city, as the
economic, political, and cultural scenes of the city became distinctly German, leading
Milwaukee to be called the Deutsch-Athen of North America.
However, this is not to say that Milwaukee was exclusively a German city. Although Germans were the largest ethnic group in the city, it is perhaps best to think of historical Milwaukee as a “city of nations.” Much like the rest of the state of Wisconsin during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a time when Wisconsin was known as the “58 percent American state” (Hoelscher, 1999, p. 535), Milwaukee was one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the country. Thousands of Irish, Italians, Czechs, Poles, Croats, Greeks, and others called Milwaukee their new home, and in 1890 Milwaukee was the most foreign city in the country as immigrants and their children made up 86.4 percent of the population (Gurda, 1999, p. 170). Each of these ethnic groups carved out their own section of the city, typically centered on a church, creating a diverse patchwork of ethnically segregated neighborhoods.

Many of these new immigrants to Milwaukee found work in factories, and unions became a powerful force in the city. In 1910, a year when the majority of working men in Milwaukee were employed in heavy industries, the growing influence of unions and the decreasing popularity of a corrupt city government led to a socialist takeover of the municipal government. The architect of the local socialist movement, and arguably the rest of the United States, was the Austro-Hungarian immigrant Victor Berger, who coined the “Milwaukee Idea” of labor politics in the United States. Of the Milwaukee Idea, Berger wrote:

“We must have a two-armed movement – a labor movement with a political arm and with an economic arm. Each arm has its own work to do, and one arm ought not to interfere with the other, although they are parts of the same body. That is the 'Milwaukee Idea.' In the personal union of the workers of both... we find the same men, with the same thoughts, aims and ideals, working in the economic and the political field, thus forming a grand army moving on two roads for the abolition of the capitalist system (as cited in Gurda, 1999 p. 206).

The rise of socialism in Milwaukee was due not only to the party’s political organization, but also grassroots efforts. Milwaukee’s Sewer Socialists, a nickname they received due to their investment in public works, were a highly organized and disciplined lot. Party leaders had a clear agenda, as well as a plan to accomplish their goals. However, the swaying of Milwaukee towards a socialist future could not come from above, as the party was to represent the working man. The power of publishing was key to winning the city, as a number of socialist newspapers began circulating throughout the city. These papers were widely distributed among trade unions in the
factories, and were translated into nearly every language spoken in Milwaukee so as to appeal to ethnic voting blocs. Beyond the influence of print, stump speakers were posted daily outside of union halls and factories to help sway the working voter. These strategies worked, as in 1910 the socialists won the city government by a landslide. Of the newly elected city aldermen, 21 of 35 were socialists, and 18 of which made a living through some form of manual labor (Gurda, 1999, p. 202-211). With the exception of 12 scattered years, socialists would control Milwaukee’s city government from 1910 to 1960.

Despite the dominance of socialism in Milwaukee during the first half of the 20th century, the city was hardly a workers’ paradise. This was especially true for the city’s African American population, which was left out of the “Milwaukee Idea.” The historical geography of African Americans in Milwaukee interestingly parallels the timeline of the rise of socialism, and a further examination into this history must be included in order to understand the city today.

Worthy of note is that Milwaukee’s African American population, when compared to similar cities such as Cleveland or Detroit, was a minuscule percent of the city’s population for many years. Until 1910, African Americans accounted for only .2 percent of Milwaukee’s population. By 1930, this number increased to 1.2 percent (Trotter, 1985, p. 41), and in 1945 during the Second Great Migration Milwaukee’s African American population had only increased to about 1.6 percent of the population, or 10,200 people (Ibid., p. 149). The small size of the African American population in Milwaukee is widely attributed to the proximity of Chicago, and the fact that the latter city absorbed a majority of the African Americans moving north during the Great Migrations. Regardless of their small size, Milwaukee’s African Americans were able to carve out a unique portion of the city as their own.

Like in other northern cities, the historical African American neighborhood of Milwaukee was known as Bronzeville (though more commonly as the Inner Core). Bronzeville was not a neighborhood by choice, but rather it was the result of racial discrimination felt in nearly every aspect of daily life. Here the same story is repeated as elsewhere, as Milwaukee’s first African Americans were only able to find low paying domestic and service work, and therefore could only afford substandard housing. The Inner Core was full of blight, as it was the historical neighborhood for Jews and newly landed immigrants who were trying to earn money and move on to greener pastures. Despite being considered a derelict neighborhood by many (white)
outsiders, the African Americans of the Inner Core were able to develop a self-reliant neighborhood and community, and maintain a culture of their own (Dougherty, 2004, p. 132-140).

Beginning with the labor shortages of World War 1, Milwaukee’s African American population was able to gain a footing in the city’s factories. This led to the momentary proletarianization of Milwaukee’s African Americans into an industrial working class, rather than the creation of a permanent urban underclass as found in many other cities (Trotter, 1985). Though discrimination still existed, Trotter argues that the acceptance of African Americans into the factories helped trigger an intra-racial split based on class distinctions. As self-interest replaced that of the common good, it became increasingly difficult for African Americans to organize and make advancements in issues related to education, health care, and housing.

In fact, housing became such a problem for the African American community that the Inner Core became a target for slum clearance. Answering calls from the black population for improved and public housing, and from the white population for a freeway to connect the newly built suburbs to the city center, from 1960-1967 Milwaukee opted to raze the Inner Core and build a freeway through its former center (Dougherty, 2004, p. 138). The freeway was built, but the public housing was not (at least not at the desired scale), causing a massive dispersal of the African American population in every direction. Many of these refugees moved towards Riverwest, while the bulk moved northward into former working class ethnic neighborhoods which further induced white flight from the city.

The African American population was left scattered, though in the same relative area of Milwaukee, and was growing rapidly throughout the 1970s as industry was leaving the city. Today, Milwaukee stands as a shell of its former self as the city has weathered massive transformations. Deindustrialization was particularly damaging, especially for the African American population which was never able to reach an equal economic footing compared to the white working class. As of the 2010 census, 29.5 percent of the city's overall population was in poverty, roughly 171,521 people, making Milwaukee the eighth poorest city in the country. Broken down further, nearly 50 percent of all children live in poverty, as well as 40 percent of the entire African American population (Tolan & Herzog, 2011). Currently there is a 44 percent employment rate among African American males (Schmid, 2012), and “...more Milwaukee
African American males were admitted to Wisconsin correctional facilities in an average year in the 2000s than were employed at the end of the decade as production workers in factories in the city of Milwaukee (Levine, 2012, p. 8).”

Clearly, Milwaukee is struggling to address these serious issues. My argument that neighborhood identity has become a catalyst for addressing Milwaukee’s economic crisis will unfold throughout the following four chapters. Chapter 2 develops the analytical standpoint from which Riverwest has been observed, focusing specifically on neighborhood identity and sense of place, resistance and social movements, and community economies and “alternatives” to capitalism. Chapter 3 will look more specifically at Riverwest and what “Riverwest” means to its residents, which leads into Chapter 4’s discussion of community activism. Finally, Chapter 5 will conclude with thoughts on the “diverse” neighborhood of Riverwest and its future.

2. Literature Review and Methods

2.1 Neighborhoods Identities and Community

A neighborhood is a fluid and blurry place with a definition that is difficult to pin down. It is “a term that is hard to define precisely, but everyone knows it when they see it (Galster, 2001, p. 2111 as cited in Martin, 2003a).” In short, a neighborhood can be described (though vaguely) as “[a]n urban area dominated by residential uses” (Martin, 2009, p. 494). These neighborhoods often carry an attached meaning, or sense of place. In the following section I will show how neighborhoods are produced and reproduced through human interaction, imagination, exclusionary practices, and/or a sense of belonging, and how neighborhoods serve as sites of political activism.

Neighborhoods, according to Martin (2003a, p. 365), “are a particular type of place: locations where human activity is centered upon social reproduction... Neighborhoods derive their meaning or salience from individual and group values and attachments, which develop through daily life habits and interactions.” In essence, neighborhoods are localized geographic places where people of a somewhat common background live, and a sense of commonality is shared throughout. Perhaps the most significant factor in neighborhood formation, as Martin sees it, is that of conflict. Through conflict neighborhoods are able to define their space and work with or against existing political and economic structures.
Schein (1997) shows that neighborhoods can be observed in the same fashion as a landscape. In examining neighborhood associations, consumption patterns, and other characteristics of a specific landscape (e.g. neighborhood), one can observe the unique qualities that produce and reproduce a landscape. For instance, the presence of cooperatively run businesses and art galleries in Riverwest say something about the landscape of the neighborhood. The forces that shape a neighborhood, then, also have the power to marginalize and exclude various groups of people (Schein, 2008; Trudeau, 2006). Conflict and opposition are therefore necessary byproducts of the formation of a neighborhood and its identity, as a neighborhood identity is never all-inclusive of the people it supposedly represents.

Neighborhoods are constructed from the various reference points, or “place-frames,” from which people view their surroundings (Martin, 2003b). Through this approach it is observed that neighborhoods, as imaginary communities, are tools for dealings in local politics. When residents come together as a neighborhood, like the Riverwest Neighborhood Association for instance, they have more power at the urban and regional levels, but also have the power to affect change closer to home (i.e. the neighborhood). However, this comes at a price. In order to create an identity which, in turn, helps to define a neighborhood, difference and diversity must be suppressed. Purcell (2001) has argued that identity-politics at the neighborhood level are wrapped up in homeownership. That is to say politics of race, class, gender, age, or any other social marker are embedded in owning a home as homeowners, through neighborhood associations, work to control and define their surroundings. As Martin (2003b, p. 730) writes, “neighborhood organizations foster a neighborhood identity that obscures social differences, such as ethnicity and class, among residents… for neighborhood-based organizations, place provides an important mobilizing discourse and identity for collective action, one that can obviate diverse facets of social identity in order to define a neighborhood based-polity.” In order for a neighborhood to become an effective political object, a singular and exclusive identity must be imagined which promotes a high degree of uniformity.

Numerous factors contribute to the production of a neighborhood and its sense of place. Through a combination of networked place, networked politics, and the politics of place, Pierce, Martin, and Murphy (2011) describe a relational place-making where these three factors intertwine to create place at various scales. Fluidity is emphasized as “relational place-making
draws on scholarship and insights about place, politics and networks by explicitly recognizing the flexible, multi-scalar and always developing meanings of place: meanings that are produced via socially, politically and economically interconnected interactions among people, institutions, and systems” (Pierce et al., 2011, p. 59). This means that neighborhoods and their identities are undergoing a constant state of production and reproduction, and gain meaning from the ways they interact with one another.

The word “community” is often found in discussions of neighborhoods and identity, and like neighborhood, it is another concept that is difficult to define. According to Iris Marion Young (1990, p. 300), community refers to an idealistic view of interpersonal relationships that “privileges unity over difference, immediacy over mediation, sympathy over recognition of the limits of one’s understanding of others from their point of view.” The idealized community seeks conformity over discrepancy and conflict. Young goes on to critique this notion of community as it creates borders and excludes others, which ultimately leads to homogeneity and conflict. To counter the all-encompassing net of community, Young promotes a politics of difference which seeks an “openness to unassimilated otherness” and intercultural understanding over sympathy or tolerance (Ibid., 319).

In the last 20 years there has been a proliferation of work and discussion on what community means, but any definition remains entirely subjective (England, 2011). Community, as discussed in this thesis and as it applies to the neighborhood of Riverwest, will refer to a relationship (particularly Young’s politics of difference), identity, territoriality, and moral obligation. In short, my use of community will refer to a group of people who share a socially constructed identity that represents a particular local place. This shared identity creates a connection between individuals, who consequently believe in serving their peers during times of need.

Whereas neighborhood is a descriptive term for place, and neighborhood identity refers to a shared sense of self expressed in a neighborhood, community refers to the relationship that develops from a neighborhood identity. In Riverwest, the identity which I will discuss later is an example of Young’s politics of difference in action. Central to the neighborhood’s identity is a sense of diversity and the embracing of difference among residents. Also, a strong activist current runs through the neighborhood which has led residents to believe in the obligation to help
one another during times of economic need. A diverse group of people can be found in Riverwest, and they see to it that they have a morally positive and constructive relationship with one another.

A neighborhood identity is a tool that politicians, planners, developers, and most importantly residents use to define what belongs and what does not in a particular place. Through a shared sense of belonging, residents of a neighborhood are able to mobilize against an unwanted presence or force, and (re)create space in their own way. Of course, identities are never constant or all-inclusive and often leave people in the margins. As I will discuss later, the identity of Riverwest represents a sense of diversity and commonality. Coming from the position that everyone belongs and that all are welcome, a position that challenges the foundation of much the discourse outlined above, the residents of Riverwest use their identity as justification for political activism and looking out for their neighbors. With that said, I will now turn to discuss the geographies of resistance and social movements so they can be tied to the concept of neighborhood identity.

2.2 Geographies of Resistance and Social Movements
As Milwaukee and Riverwest were experiencing a wave of radicalism throughout the 1960s, so too were the hallowed halls of academia. In geography this wave helped to pave the way for the analysis of resistance and social movements. In the pioneering first issue of *Antipode*, a journal committed to “radical geography,” Richard Peet (1969) outlines the purpose and goals of this “new left geography.” Revolutionary in every sense of the word, Peet’s diagnosis of geography, and indeed the world, in the 1960s is one plagued by political repression and conservatism. Through its subject matter, geography was to be used as a tool in achieving radical change by exposing and actively fighting every form of political, social or economic injustice across the globe. By challenging the traditional academic and political establishment, radical geography was and continues to be an embodiment of the anti-capitalist spirit of resistance (Castree, Chatterton, & Heynen, 2010).

The geographies of resistance and social movements once again came into focus following the so-called “cultural turn” experienced across the social sciences during 1980s and 1990s. As “traditional” cultural geography came under criticism for being atheoretical and out-of-date, geographers began to employ social theory in their studies of the world. This “‘new’
cultural geography brought discussions of power and resistance to the forefront as geography became explicitly theory-informed, political and attentive to the problematic of power relations and social structures (Rowntree, 1988, p. 579).” Around this same time, Peter Jackson issued an explicit call for a consideration of the geographies of resistance (Jackson, 1988, p. 267). Furthermore, in a paper coauthored with Denis Cosgrove, the new cultural geography is stated as being “interested in… dominant ideologies and in forms of resistance to them (Cosgrove & Jackson, 1987, p. 95).” As Jackson notes (1989, p. 62), there is indeed a territorial aspect to resistance among subcultures. Places, or territories, serve as sites for communities to coalesce, where subcultures can simply be without the gaze of the outsider. In terms movements that challenge the dominance of capitalism, such as those found in Riverwest, the role of place has been especially important to the social reproduction of the struggle (Brown & Pickerill, 2009; Chatterton, 2010; Gibson-Graham, 2006a; Hardt & Negri, 2005; Katsiaficas, 2006; Mudu, 2004; Wright, 2002).

An expanding interest in the geographies of resistance soon led to analyses of the spatial aspects of social movements. A social movement refers to “The organized efforts of multiple individuals or organizations, acting outside of formal state or economic spheres, to pursue political goals (McCarthy, 2009, p. 695).” Though part of the geographies of resistance, work on the specific geographies of social movements have produced a rich amount of scholarly literature which has helped to guide me throughout my research.

To start outside of the discipline of geography, though, I will turn to Manuel Castells’ highly influential book The City and the Grassroots (1983). Here Castells shows how grassroots struggles have the ability to create a city that is reflective of their goals. An urban social movement, it is said, is an organization of people using collective action to change the culture and politics of a city in a way that counters the established norms. These movements are each defined by their end goals, which ultimately shape the confrontation - in terms of place, time, means, actions - between the competing parties. The root of this confrontation is the vision for an alternative city where the dominant class has been challenged and possibly removed by those working for a more ideal urban system.

Around 10 years after The City and the Grassroots was published, more sweeping accounts of social movements began to emerge in the discipline of geography. Perhaps as a result
of the “spatial turn” in the social sciences that Castells helped trigger (Miller, 2006, p. 208), the particular places of social movements gained interest as the crucial questions of where and why a movement formed had previously been overlooked. For instance, in Routledge’s (1993) early work on the geography of social movements, two specific peasant movements were examined in the context of “terrains of resistance,” meaning “a site of contestation among differing beliefs, values, and goals that are place-specific” (Routledge, 1993, p. 36).

In a continuation of Routledge’s emphasis on the role of place in social movements, Miller (2000) took a comparative approach to understanding new (i.e. not class based) social movements. In this specific case, Miller examines how three different antinuclear social movements in the greater Boston area achieved varying levels of success and failure based upon the differing social geographies of the cities in which the movements were located. Most notably, these differences included local electoral systems, education levels, and industry (or lack thereof) which ultimately shaped levels of activism in each city. Indeed, history and culture play a significant role in Riverwest’s activism, as the neighborhood’s progressive attitude has made more experimental and contentious political engagement possible.

As the term “social movement” does not adequately explain all forms of political activism, there have been arguments to reframe the discussion in terms of “contentious politics”, or “concerted, counter-hegemonic social and political action, in which differently positioned participants come together to challenge dominant systems of authority, in order to promote and enact alternative imaginaries” (Leitner, Sheppard, & Sziarto, 2008, p. 157). The authors argue that this action, contrary to much of the geographic work on contentious politics which has privileged one particular spatiality over another, needs to be examined in terms of the multiple spatialities (scale, place, networks, mobility, etc.) that help to make it possible. In later sections I will address some of these multiple spatialities, and highlight how noncapitalist struggles in the city take an explicitly geographic form.

Social movements, or contentious politics in today’s lexicon, have been subject to geographic inquiry for nearly 50 years. This is especially true following the cultural turn of the late 1980s and early 1990s when the geographies of resistance became particularly fashionable. Examinations into the geographies of social movements typically follow two general currents: how spatialities have shaped social movements, and how social movements have shaped
spatialities. This thesis will highlight both of these approaches in understanding how resistance to capitalism has flourished in Riverwest, and what progress has been made in destabilizing the current economic system.

2.3 Alternative Geographic Imaginations
Alternative geographic imaginations, and struggles to enact such visions, are an important subset of the geographies of resistance and social movements. Examinations into grassroots movements that attempt to destabilize the political and economic hegemony of capitalism have been especially fruitful, although there is still much to be addressed. More specifically, I see the need to develop an understanding of how noncapitalist groups turn their ideals into realities at the neighborhood level.

More often than not, discussions on alternative geographic imaginations come in response to the neoliberalization of urban space. Neoliberalism refers to an ideology that believes free markets with absolutely no state intervention are ideal for economic growth and prosperity (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). Ascending into its hegemonic position during the Thatcher/Reagan years, neoliberal modes of economics and governance were touted by the countries of the North Atlantic following Margaret Thatcher’s declaration that “there is no alternative.”

According to Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell (2002), although the concrete form neoliberal ideology takes varies from one place to the next, it has meant for cities a dismantling of the public sector so as to open new markets for profit and competition. Furthermore, neoliberalism is not an end goal, but rather a means to an unknown end through the processes of neoliberalization which are highly adaptive and varied. Typically the urban tendencies of neoliberalism relate to “roll-back” policies of deregulation and “roll-out” policies of marketization, which have created more authoritarian and economically unequal cities. Milwaukee has seen its fair share of neoliberal reforms, as the revitalization of the urban core has been market driven (Kenny and Zimmerman, 2004; Ward, 2007) and the parks system, considered a triumph of socialism in Milwaukee, has seen certain aspects of privatization (Perkins, 2009).

In the face of such concentrations of political and economic power, it is easy for one to lose hope while envisioning an alternative. As Peck and Tickell (2002) suggest, local resistance
to neoliberalism is futile as change can only come through a progressive retaking of “the system.” However, I find this position to be rather problematic and pessimistic. As a wave of conservatism has swept across the governments of North America and Europe, a progressive retaking of “the system” seems no less likely than an all-out revolution. In order to retake “the system,” all potential routes to such an end must be explored. As neoliberal cities have been built through a process of trial and error, so too will their alternatives, with or without assistance from “the system.”

This critique is common among geographers, with a special issue of *Antipode* entitled *Alternative Geographical Imaginations* highlighting such a position. In the introductory article, Andrew Cumbers and Paul Routledge (2004) argue that there are indeed alternatives to neoliberalism and that they exist at a variety of scales across the world. Rather than arguing for a single alternative to neoliberal hegemony, the authors call for a plurality of spatial alternatives (which the subsequent articles show) that promote a more democratic and just world. In order to create something new, there must be spaces that incubate alternative political thought.

Similarly, David Harvey has argued in *Spaces of Hope* (2000) that activists must carve spaces out of capitalist society where alternative forms of economics and politics can be explored. Harvey develops his argument by combining Marxist and utopian thought back together in the hopes of creating a more optimistic vision of the future. As factories are rapidly disappearing, the working class and its allies need to find ways to create and take control of space in order to operate from a position of strength in their struggle. This will be done through a process of experimentation that engages in a utopian dialectic that bridges the gap between idealism and reality. In so doing, activists become the architects of the new world in which they have envisioned.

Actually existing experiments of political and economic alternatives to capitalism have received a great amount of attention from geographers addressing “community economies” (Gibson-Graham, 2006a). Due to its dynamic nature, the idea of a community economy lacks a singular definition, but offers a framework to address the political and economic needs of a noncapitalist society (as opposed to anti-capitalist, which implies a knowledge of what capitalism should be replaced with). Specifically, a community economy would address what is necessary for survival, how surplus is created, redistributed, and consumed, and how a commons
can be maintained. As a key point to their argument, the authors show that the regional economy is continually adapting and open to change, and by moving beyond a language of capitalocentrism - discourse that privileges capitalist ideology and dismisses all possible alternatives – new forms of political economy can be realized.

However, the approach taken by advocates of the community economy seems at times to be rather gradual and nonconfrontational. Using more radical, if not revolutionary tactics, anti-capitalist activists have engaged in struggles influenced by autonomist (or autonomous) Marxist theory (Hardt & Negri, 2005; Katsiaficas, 2006; Mudu, 2004; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Ruggiero, 2000; Social Centres Network, 2008; Wright, 2002). Developing out of the post-war struggles of Italian workers, autonomous Marxism calls for the everyday contestation and insurrection against capitalism as a way of transforming society. The world-building potential of such theories is highlighted best in the works of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2001; 2005) especially through their interpretation of Spinoza’s concept of the multitude. According to Hardt and Negri, the multitude is a revolutionary struggle to create a plurality of anti-capitalist and democratic alternatives to the perpetual state of war and the anti-democratic tendencies felt the world-over.

These struggles have received a bit of attention from geographers, particularly in the United Kingdom, where an in-depth action research project was completed on “autonomous geographies,” or spaces where noncapitalist forms of organization are created through resistance (Chatterton, 2005; 2010; Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010; Hodkinson and Chatterton, 2006; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Social Centres Network, 2008; The Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010). These autonomous spaces are interstitially positioned between the capitalist society they seek to destroy, and that of which they hope to create. Though “autonomy” means different things to different groups, those working on “autonomous geographies” view it as a strategy used by activists to change the larger world through the accumulation of a series of small and local changes (which will be the working definition adopted for this research). In so doing, the gap between theories of autonomy and how they are put into practice is closed through a process of experimentation.

In understanding how different scholars have approached more utopian visions of the city, the ways grassroots organizations work to achieve such goals can then be examined.
Various groups exist in Riverwest which are actively working to destabilize and replace the capitalist economy using a variety of means. The control of space, as I will discuss later, is a key tactic for these grassroot activist groups as they take action across the neighborhood. Through the control of space, activists are able to experiment and recreate the city in their own way.

2.4 Methodology
While examining the neighborhood identity of Riverwest and how it plays into the construction of an alternative economy, a variety of qualitative methods were used. The relevance of qualitative methods to research in human geography has been well established as they highlight the messy complexities of daily life (Crang, 2002; Wiles, Rosenberg, & Kearns, 2005). Through the deployment of qualitative methods, the researcher can uncover a deeper meaning of the issue at hand through an active engagement with those most closely involved. Examinations into both neighborhood identity and social movements are of no exception. For instance, Paul Chatterton (2010a) engaged in participatory research and semi-structured interviews as a way to collaborate with and better understand anti-capitalist activists in the UK. Also, Deborah Martin (2003a) employed interviews in her understanding of how neighborhoods are socially constructed in Athens, Georgia. For these reasons and others, as well as my personal beliefs, participant observation and semi-structured interviews were used in this particular research project. In so doing, these methods helped to develop an intimate understanding of the informal relations that define a specific group’s power dynamics, how people perceive and interact with the neighborhood of Riverwest, and offer further insight into the possibilities for constructing alternative economies and political systems.

The bulk of the data collected for this project came directly from semi-structured interviews with residents and people involved in the community of Riverwest. Once in the field, I sought out various spaces of political activism and community engagement that were previously identified. The process of recruiting participants for my research began at the Wright Street Resource Center (WSRC), a space that hosts various groups active in Riverwest and greater Milwaukee. After a brief conversation with a volunteer who was present during my first visit, as well as those who came and went while I was there, I left with an interview scheduled and a list of several more potential contacts to pursue. From there, the method of snowballing
was used to gather the names and contact information of a network of activists across Riverwest, and the process was repeated at other locations so as to not focus on a single group.

In all, I conducted a total of eleven interviews with 10 activists (see Appendix A) and residents of Riverwest. The interview subjects represented a total of seven different groups in Riverwest and often had some overlap with one another. Interviews were mostly conducted in public spaces such as parks or coffee shops, while a few took place in the residence of the subject. Interviews were chosen over questionnaires and surveys as they allow the researcher to explore an informant’s thoughts and perspective in more detail, and to ask and explore new questions as they come up. An interview schedule was used to guide the interview process, with each schedule outlining 10-15 questions (see Appendix B) that took roughly 45 minutes to answer. Thematically, these questions touched upon the neighborhood of Riverwest and how residents perceived it, the places of activism in the neighborhood, what goals may exist, and the strategies used by activists. Each interview was recorded using a digital audio recorder and stored on a secure hard drive. Following the completion of each interview, all audio was transcribed, aliases were assigned, and interviews were grouped together and indexed using key words.

Semi-structured interviews, like any other method, are imperfect and posed a few problems. Admittedly, the number of interviews conducted came short of what I had hoped for. As with any project, finding research subjects and scheduling interviews with them became an arduous task. Beyond the typical constraints of work, school, and family, interviewees were also intensely involved in the community of Riverwest and various volunteer organizations, which made the possible window of opportunity to be interviewed even more limited.

Using a snowball method of recruitment made it difficult to branch out beyond existing social networks within the neighborhood. Strong personal connections existed from one person to the next, and a somewhat biased perspective on the neighborhood was observed. However, this bias was not universal, and even when an informant shared a particular bias it was often supplemented with a reflection on their own positionality within the neighborhood. The informants were not speaking for the neighborhood, but rather for themselves as residents of the neighborhood.
When approaching activists who land far to the left on the political spectrum, I occasionally came face to face with the issues of anti-intellectualism and security culture. In terms of the anti-intellectualism that I experienced, activists sometimes shuddered once I revealed my intentions and purposes as an academic. Based upon the work of others (Clough, 2011; Fenton, 2004; Routledge, 1996; 2008; The Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010), this roadblock was hardly surprising but still disappointing. Fortunately this was not a common problem in my work, and the few times this happened I was able to overcome the barrier through further explanation of myself and the research project.

Dealing with security culture also posed problems to the research process. Security culture refers to a code of silence, or at the very least vagueness, adopted by activists involved in potentially criminal actions so as to prevent the infiltration of police or other informants (Clough, 2011, p. 193). In terms of my research, this meant that some activists would occasionally refuse to answer questions or to further elaborate on what they said, and often times retreat to a more vague use of language. Despite the potential for being highly problematic to my research, security culture was for the most part not an issue, and I learned to reframe relevant questions in a nonconfrontational or prying manner. Also, through my engagement and presence within the neighborhood, I made it clear that I would be giving back to Riverwest rather than exploiting its residents for my own academic advancement. Through my continuous engagement, research subjects slowly began to open up to my project.

Participatory research methods were also used in the execution of my research. Similar studies have employed Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a way to collaborate with activists and work towards a mutually agreed upon goal. A recent resurgence in PAR has been observed, as researchers “not only comment on but get directly involved in seeking solutions to social problems and inequalities” (Pain, 2003, p. 655). For example, the Autonomous Geographies Collective (2010) used PAR in their research with activists on the everyday strategies of anti-capitalist activists. Similarly, Cameron and Gibson (2005) engaged with the a local community to explore diverse economies and economic possibility in an economically distressed region. Successful PAR projects often span a number of years and work off of pre-existing connections between the participants and the researcher, two things this project did not have. As PAR would have been the ideal methodological approach to my research, it simply was
not possible. Even though a fully formed and collaborative research agenda was unattainable, other participatory research methods were used.

Participant observation refers to developing an understanding of the place and meaning of everyday life through observation (Kearns, 2005). More specifically, in my research I attempted to adopt the role of an observer-as-participant, or someone who is present and also active in the group that the research is conducted with. This meant that rather than simply reaching out to different activists and asking for interviews, I also regularly attended events, functions, and meetings as well as volunteering some of my time to various causes. Rather than taking notes during one of these proceedings, I immediately recorded all of my thoughts and memories once I was removed from the situation so as to not make anyone uncomfortable. Once done writing, I reexamined my thoughts while elaborating and highlighting any information that was necessary.

My own positionality as a researcher and my relationship with participants was of great concern during the research process. As I was in close contact with residents and activists in Riverwest, and as I developed more personal relationships and affinities with various causes in the neighborhood, maintaining my objectivity as a researcher became ever more important. My objective analysis of the neighborhood was a continuous process that continued long after my field work was complete. While in the field, it was necessary to incessantly ask questions of myself and others and to maintain a critical eye towards Riverwest. Once removed from the Riverwest, it was imperative to continue thinking critically about what I learned and observed in the neighborhood, and to look upon my information with new eyes.

Developing participatory methods was a political and deliberate decision, similar to previous work on anti-capitalist movements. In so doing, I developed a more personal and in-depth understanding of each group and how they fit into Riverwest, while overcoming the insider/outside dichotomy faced in previous research with activists. Through politically informed and motivated research, it was my intention to give a voice to the activists in Riverwest, and to help others believe that there are indeed successful methods of political and economic organization that do not subscribe to capitalist ideology.

3. Constructing Riverwest
3.1 Riverwest’s Dynamic Identities
As previously mentioned, this thesis looks specifically at the neighborhood of Riverwest in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and how a strong sense of identity has influenced local political activism. Located just over a mile northeast of downtown, Riverwest is an inner city neighborhood sandwiched between very different parts of the city. The south and east boundaries of the neighborhood follow the Milwaukee river while the north and west boundaries are marked by Capitol Drive and Holton Street, respectively. Riverwest is almost entirely residential, with a clear transition from dense multi-family housing in the south to an almost suburban residential pattern in the north. Aside from housing, multiple commercial strips intersect Riverwest on an east to west axis, which help to create a nearly self-sufficient economy for the neighborhood.

Figure 2 - A map of Riverwest. Created by Trey Schiefelbein using Google Maps.

Throughout the history of Riverwest, there have always been strong but dynamic identities associated with the neighborhood. As with other industrial cities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, neighborhood identities in Milwaukee were tied to ethnic and national
The changing identities of Riverwest are explored in Tom Tolan’s (2003) comprehensive history of the neighborhood. Using this text as my background source and a tool for my own examination, I will now show how identity has shaped Riverwest in the past, and ultimately the present.

The area that is now Riverwest was first settled in the mid 1800s. Originally known as Humboldt (named for the German geographer Alexander von Humboldt), the neighborhood started as a small German fishing village and commercial post upstream from Milwaukee’s downtown. Unfortunately the village and all commercial development was destroyed in a flood soon after. Through all of this, Humboldt maintained a German presence and soon became known as the “German Gold Coast” in a reflection of its inhabitant’s nationality and economic class.

The German Gold Coast remained so until the early 20th century when the area started to urbanize and become increasingly Polish. First known as Kepa (in reference to a particular Polish ethnicity that settled the area), then Zagora (Polish for “beyond the hill”), and eventually Polish Town, the German influence on the neighborhood waned as the Poles altered the cultural landscape. The Poles were considerably poorer than the Germans, but this did not influence their drive to own land and a home. Using what little money they had, the swelling Polish community would buy up whatever land they could afford, and then construct small houses (known as Polish flats) that could accommodate more than one family as a way of supplementing income. Soon the neighborhood was full of this particular housing style, and in 1901 the Polish dominance of the neighborhood was cemented with the completion of St. Casimir’s Church, a Gothic revival cathedral that stands with a commanding presence in the center of Riverwest.

World War I brought changes to the German and Polish communities of Milwaukee, specifically as the communities began to age and the younger generations began to Americanize. Though signs of Riverwest’s Polish history linger today, mainly among the elderly population that chose to not leave the city, the presence of a Polish Falcons fraternal lodge, the engravings on St. Casimir’s, and elsewhere, the neighborhood experienced some major changes.
As urban renewal and highway construction projects were leveling parts of the city, Riverwest began to diversify. However, as in other cities and urban neighborhoods, residents of Riverwest defended their ethnic heritage and surroundings in an attempt to maintain the whiteness of the neighborhood. In Riverwest, this meant that families and older neighborhood residents would either refuse to leave the neighborhood, or carefully select who they would sell their homes to. German families typically sold their homes to the highest bidders, while Poles would only sell to other Poles. This discrimination spread across the neighborhood, reaching all the way to the Catholic church as leading clergy informed African American and Puerto Rican families that Polish language classes were required to join a church, in effect turning away many prospective members (Tolan, 2003, p. 77-85).

For a time, Riverwest was able to preserve its whiteness, but bordering neighborhoods became increasingly black and Puerto Rican. By the 1960s Riverwest was no longer able to preserve its ethnic identity. The diversification of Riverwest was felt most rapidly on the western edge of the neighborhood along Holton Street and in the south of the neighborhood where there
is a concentration of rental properties. Soon Polish services at St. Casmir’s were replaced with Spanish, and the population of Riverwest became younger and more diverse. Though once a source of major contention, the increasing diversity of Riverwest (which influenced the name change from Polish Town) has now become a source of pride and a key aspect of the neighborhood’s identity.

3.2 Identity and Belonging in Riverwest

3.2.1 A Place Where Everyone Belongs
As I found through my interviews, if there is one thing residents of Riverwest like to talk about it is Riverwest itself. One resident enthusiastically described the neighborhood as being “The best place on Earth, Disneyland be damned,” while another, despite having “lived all-over”, said Riverwest was the most “eclectic” and “flavorful” place he had ever lived. Residents were quick to point out what they believed was great about the neighborhood, but finding out what was potentially wrong with Riverwest took a little more pressing.

Residents frequently commented on the diversity of Riverwest as its greatest strength. As one nearly lifelong resident of the neighborhood described, Riverwest represents a sort of crucible for the city of Milwaukee. As one crosses the Milwaukee River from Riverwest and travels east towards both Lake Michigan and the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee campus, property values can quickly climb into the millions of dollars within a matter of blocks. On the other hand, if the same person were to travel just a few blocks west into the neighborhood of Harambee, a house could be purchased for as little as $1. As in most other post-industrial American cities, this division in property values can also be observed through the racial composition of each respective neighborhood. With Riverwest falling between the poor and black neighborhood of Harambee and the wealthy and white neighborhoods of the East Side, a mixture of the two occurs.

Of course, the diversity of Riverwest is far more than white and black, or rich and poor. A number of historically and economically contingent processes, some of which I previously outlined, came together to shape the demographic configuration of the neighborhood. As Vernon, a long time resident of Riverwest described:

There are African Americans who moved in here for a better life, and a lot of young people who move in for a more affordable life, and the existing population was mostly
Polish, a little bit German, and a little bit Hispanic resulting from urban development downtown (interview, 2011).

Sam, the president of the Riverwest Neighborhood Association, similarly said:

Figure 4 - A map of segregation in Milwaukee. Red represents the white population, blue the African American, yellow the Hispanic, and green the Asian. Map by Eric Fischer.

It's the most diverse area in the state if not in the country. You name a particular category, income, political leaning, race, nationality, sexuality, down the line, we got it here. It's here in Riverwest. We may not have a whole lot, but it's here. The great thing is
that people are able to have those differences and still work together in peace and harmony (interview, 2011).

Whether this level of diversity is true or not is perhaps impossible to determine. However, as Milwaukee repeatedly finds itself at the top of the most segregated cities in the country (Tolan and Glauber, 2010), to say Riverwest is the most diverse neighborhood in the city is probably true.

When posed with the question of whether or not Riverwest is becoming less diverse due to gentrification or the increasing number of college students, residents were skeptical. Most said that if anything the neighborhood is becoming more segregated, but the level of diversity remains the same if not more so. During our interview, the chair of the Riverwest Neighborhood Association was able to give a block by block breakdown of residential segregation in the neighborhood while emphasizing that these divisions are hardening, partly due to historical divisions in the neighborhood and an increasing young and white population near the Milwaukee River. Furthermore, another resident described diversity as being Riverwest’s “excuse” rather than its strength, and that “it isn’t necessarily a strength unless there is a sense of coming together.”

Though some would perhaps disagree, based upon my field observations it is clear that this sense of coming together is largely absent. During the annual Fourth of July celebration in Gordon Park, one of the neighborhood’s most significant public spaces, a clear racial division was visible. The morning bicycle parade for children and their families, and also the subsequent festival, was largely a gathering of white people. However, as the day progressed and more black families came to picnic in the park, the white families gradually started to vacate. Soon the festival went from being predominately white to predominately black, but ultimately integrated just in time for the fireworks.
The night before in Riverwest, the neighborhood was host to a number of violent and possibly racially motivated events. Around 40 teenagers, all of whom were African American, gathered following the citywide fireworks display and proceeded to ransack and rob a local convenience store. Fueled by sugar, the group moved towards Kilbourn Reservoir Park on the southern edge of Riverwest and attacked a group of young adults who decided to linger after the fireworks. The attacked, who were all white, reported an unprovoked swarm and subsequent mugging which sent several people to the hospital. One victim reported hearing “Oh, white girl bleeds a lot” (Perry as cited in Jones, 2011) as a number of other racial taunts were shouted.
Though the racial aspects of this violence were probably a coincidence, the media portrayed the event as part of a string of racial attacks Milwaukee. Recently a suburban mall fell victim to a 100 person flash mob of young African Americans who tore apart several stores before security could stop them (Walker, Herald, & Durhams, 2011). Also, a similar group attacked white people as they left the Wisconsin State Fair, sometimes pulling people off motorcycles or targeting others in their cars (Walker, Johnson, & Schossow, 2011). Certainly it is convenient to label the attacks in Riverwest as part of a narrative of racial violence in Milwaukee. However, I am hesitant to do so. Some parallels can be drawn between each of these attacks, namely the size and demographics of the attackers. Beyond that, only one attack appears to be explicitly racial (that of the Wisconsin State Fair), while the event at the Mayfair Mall was more about property destruction (anti-capitalism?). What happened in Riverwest appears at the surface to have elements of both other attacks. The victims in Kilbourn Reservoir Park were most likely attacked because they were in the park, not because they were white. The mob had already assembled, destroyed a convenience store, and moved on to terrorize the park. The attack was most likely a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Regardless, residents held rallies to express that hatred and violence were not a part of Riverwest, and community discussions followed on the topic of racial tensions in Milwaukee. I was able to attend one of these discussions at the Cream City Collectives, a local anti-authoritarian space. Just as the discussion was about to start, one participant made the sarcastic comment “So, we’re here to talk about race” to highlight that everyone in the room was white. Soon the room started to become slightly more diverse, but it still was by no means balanced. So, as with the diversity of Riverwest, it was there but never fully realized.

Despite these occasional flares of racial turmoil, diversity in Riverwest remains a source of pride among residents. Even though residents are very different from one another, difference is celebrated as one of the characteristics that makes Riverwest Riverwest. From difference comes a sense of belonging; a feeling that all are welcome, even if this feeling is fragile. As these feelings are fragile, or as they are perhaps not universally felt across the neighborhood, where they come from remains questionable. As I will show later, circulations of capital within the real estate market have mostly skipped Riverwest, so it is unlikely that politicians, planners, or developers are propagating this particular aspect of the neighborhood’s identity. Rather, the
diversity of Riverwest is promoted by local residents as a tool for preserving the neighborhood’s ideal of community.

3.2.2 A Home for the Counterculture

The identity of Riverwest is far more than that of a diverse neighborhood. As Riverwest is host to great amounts of difference, it is also seen as being different from the rest of Milwaukee. Getting back to Schein’s (2009) argument that a sense of belonging develops from dominant political discourses as they play out in a particular place, and that an oppositional politics of belonging develops from these dominant discourses, perhaps it is best to view Riverwest as representing an oppositional sense of belonging compared to the rest of Milwaukee at large. With that said, I will now turn to discuss Riverwest’s activist and countercultural identity.

In general, the political spectrum of Riverwest covers a range of perspectives from American style liberalism to the far left. Of course, conservatism must exist somewhere in the neighborhood, but it is rarely (if ever) seen or heard. Five months after the historic labor protests in Wisconsin, the yards and windows of homes in Riverwest continue to overflow with signs expressing their support for unions and the recall of Governor Scott Walker.

Though the specificities of activism and the ways they play out across the neighborhood will be discussed at length later, it is important to first point a few things out. Much of the activism in Riverwest is community activism, as in people are trying to make the world a better place starting with their neighborhood. Furthermore, many desire that any social change is to be accomplished as autonomously as possible without relying on the help or influence of outsiders. As I will show in the next section, for many in the neighborhood this autonomous current is not a by-product of libertarian idealism. Rather, it is a necessity for survival as Riverwest is a poor and often times disenfranchised neighborhood. This means that in order to improve the safety of the neighborhood, residents turn to community policing. In order to increase access to high quality foods, vacant lots have been transformed into urban gardens. In order to improve the economic vitality of the neighborhood, residents open local businesses to cater to the needs of others. As time passes, Riverwest is becoming increasingly self-sufficient and self-reliant; it is becoming more autonomous.

One resident even went so far as to say that Riverwest is the most “anti-authoritarian” of neighborhoods in Milwaukee. He argued that Riverwest has become a natural space of
antagonism between the east and west of Milwaukee, and that people are drawn to this space because there are no strict rules for what belongs and what does not. In so doing, residents are pushed to do things collectively, to push the boundaries of what is expected, to create their ideal neighborhood. Furthermore, as various groups (typically minorities or the neighborhood anarchists) are frequently “terrorized” by the police, though in different ways and to different degrees, these groups of people have developed a distrust for authority that perpetuates itself across the neighborhood. Whether this is true or not, or whether or not the neighborhood self-identifies as “anti-authoritarian,” is difficult to say. However, it is true that anti-police graffiti and posters are common throughout the neighborhood, and a number of organizations exist to help people meet their needs on a collective basis.

The political leanings of the neighborhood can also be observed through a number of community-wide events. The most explicit example can be found in Riverwest’s 4th of July celebration, which has been co-opted into “Energy Independence Day.” Volunteers set up booths around Gordon Park that offered information on composting, urban beekeeping, raising chickens, Milwaukee Urban Gardens, and more. Live music, particularly protest songs, were performed throughout the day on a stage that was powered by bicycle generators, solar panels, and homemade wind turbines.

The co-opting of the 4th of July and its rebranding as Energy Independence Day highlights some of Riverwest’s racial dynamics. Though the neighborhood presents itself as a home of diversity where all sorts of people interact with one another, Energy Independence Day proved otherwise. The event was help in one corner of the semi-rectangular Gordon Park, while the rest of the park remained open to whoever wanted to use it. Energy Independence Day was, for much of the first part of the day, a gathering of the neighborhood’s white residents. Outside of the designated area for Energy Independence Day, the park began to fill with African American and Hispanic families who were taking the day to picnic. Soon a stark division could be observed in the park, as the white population had their corner, and the African Americans and Hispanics had everything else. Later in the day the barrier broke, but not until Energy Independence day was nearly over. Like the neighborhood, Gordon Park was host to a diverse population that was highly segregated.
Another key event is the annual Locust Street Festival. Though the political message is not as explicit as Energy Independence Day, the Locust Street Festival can be traced back to the political activism of the 1970s. As Milwaukee was undergoing several urban renewal projects and being adapted into a more car-friendly city, the buildings lining Locust Street (the main thoroughfare and commercial district in Riverwest) were slated for demolition in order to make the road better suited for heavy traffic. In an act of protest, residents of Riverwest organized the festival to highlight how important Locust Street is to the neighborhood, and the festival has happened every year since. Now, as a driver exits Interstate 43 and drives towards Riverwest, they meet an instant bottleneck of traffic as they cross Holton Street (the western boundary of the neighborhood).

The consumption patterns of the neighborhood also reflect an activist and countercultural identity. Though liquor stores, food pantries, and corner markets that advertise fried foods and lottery tickets remain scattered across the neighborhood, the presence of cafes, art galleries, yoga
studios, and cooperatives\(^1\) is far more common. Of course, being in a city famous for its beer, there is nearly a bar on every corner in Riverwest. Aside from the neighborhood dive bars, there are also local establishments such as the Art Bar (which frequently hosts art exhibits), the Bremen Cafe (which serves a wide selection of vegetarian food), and the Riverwest Public House (which was founded using cooperative principles), and others which reflect the consumption habits of Riverwest’s residents.

So, it may seem that Riverwest is host to a number of community groups, events, and businesses that can be found in any typical urban neighborhood. What separates Riverwest from the rest of Milwaukee, then, is that these aspects of the neighborhood have been created and altered to reflect the neighborhood’s preference for something different. In most cases this difference is intentional, and at times it is indeed oppositional as residents are working to create alternative modes of political and economic organization. As I will now show, the terrain of Riverwest has become a sort of laboratory for creating a community economy at the neighborhood level, and that this aspect of the neighborhood is possible

4. Community Activism and Economic Uncertainty

4.1 Searching for Something Better
Cities, through design and disorder, have always brought diverse groups of people together in densely-packed areas. Though tumultuous at times, in order for a city to function there must be a feeling of coexistence and cooperation among its residents. As Daniel Hoan, a former socialist mayor of Milwaukee, once said “A city then, in the broader sense, is a community of people, who band themselves together to secure for themselves the things that are vital to a happy, productive, orderly existence” (Hoan as cited in Gurda, 1999, p. v). This, in short, is a process that continues to play out in Riverwest.

Movements of capital (or lack thereof) and people have had a tremendous influence on the character of Riverwest. In general, a pessimistic view of the economy (from local to global scales) seems to hang over the neighborhood. While discussing difficulties in securing funding with a local community organizer, she timidly but tellingly said, “A lot of us are concerned about

\(^1\) “Cooperatives” refers to businesses that operate on a non-hierarchical structure and are managed by a combination of workers, volunteers, and consumers. These enterprises will be discussed further in chapter 4.
where the community is going, and our resources are becoming less and less, and it is fairly probably things [the current economic and political climate] won’t improve.” When speaking on a similar topic, Vernon took a more confrontational approach, while simultaneously offering his solution in saying,

The [funding] can’t come from the standard capitalist system, which fucked everything up, and they really did. They’ve lost even their own moral compass as to what is permissible to do in a capitalist society. In a socialist or cooperative society where people are working together more closely, it’s not easy, but it is easier to stop corruption or have a pure hearted direction if people learn how to have civil dialogue in a fashion that is respectful and allows other opinions (interview, 2011).

This pessimism and distrust towards the current capitalist system may at least partially come from the experience of disenfranchisement and unemployment felt across the neighborhood. As Trevor said,

[In Riverwest] there is this kind of grey economy I think. There are a lot of people who live in this area, and it is kind of unclear how they make money. There are no jobs really in this neighborhood, so you have to leave the neighborhood to get to work, and I’m like one of the few people who does work in the neighborhood. I mean, there are like maybe 100 jobs or something for the 5,000 people that live here, so like I work at a video store where I work two days a week, and that is only two days a week, so how do all these other people make money? If you don’t have normal work, you have to figure out how to fend for yourself (interview, 2011).

This was an issue that frequently came up in my interviews, as many interviewees mentioned how they are out of work, recently unemployed, or devoting their time to the community. So, as many people seem to be out of work, or choosing not to work, grassroots community organizations have formed to help residents with what they cannot afford.²

Beyond the coffers of Riverwest’s residents, a lack of capital can also be observed in the landscape of the neighborhood. The nearby neighborhoods of Schlitz Park, Brewer’s Hill, and the East Side have seen a considerable amount of mixed-use condominiums constructed in recent years (Zimmerman, 2008). This pattern of urban economic “development” has slowly trickled into Riverwest along the Milwaukee River at the neighborhoods southern boundary, but not

² For more information on the increasing presence of informal economies, see Saskia Sassen’s Cities in a World Economy (2011, p. 241-272). Sassen traces the rapid expansion of informal economies to the 1980s when European and North American cities faced deindustrialization and a spike in unemployment rates. Labor markets soon became more flexible and open, and incomes dropped. The informal economy is based upon the simple fact, then, that low income residents need low cost services.
nearly to the extent as seen as elsewhere. When comparing Riverwest to neighborhoods in other cities across the country, one resident described how the influx of capital into Riverwest has been very slow, and with the recent economic crisis it has almost entirely stopped. Alex said,

Being in other cities like San Francisco or New York, and seeing how rapidly a neighborhood will change, that I will see and go back to a year later, it will change more there than it has here in the eight years that I’ve lived here, just because there is much more circulation of capital. If it was a different economy, it would be a different game (interview, 2011).

So, as the construction of condominiums has stopped in Riverwest, investment has continued in surrounding areas. This has left of vacuum of corporate money in the neighborhood, which has helped to maintain the cheap rents and local businesses that define Riverwest. Movements and circulations of capital have largely bypassed Riverwest, and in so doing the local economy has remained independent.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, residents of Riverwest view their neighborhood as a place where people move to improve their quality of life. Also, the neighborhood acts as a crucible for one of the most segregated cities in the country. Riverwest is an integrated neighborhood between two of the most segregated parts of the city. These movements of people and migration patterns have had a definite influence on Riverwest as new residents come to the area looking for something more. As Samantha stated,

I moved here because of cheap rents, with migration patterns coming in opposite directions, looking for a better life, a more affordable life...there are African Americans who move in here for a better life, and a lot of young people who move in for a more affordable life (interview, 2011).
Similarly, the lure of affordability brought in Trevor:

I first moved here because most of my friends lived here, because the rent was cheaper, because it is a more interesting neighborhood than the East Side, which I was living in the dorms at first... mostly cheap rent at first though, I didn’t think about what living in the neighborhood meant until I had lived here for a couple of years. It’s always seemed to have kind of a bohemian, artist, poor people kind of current within it, but it also has this progressive, naive-liberal “we want to develop the community into something green and everything” (interview, 2011).
What exactly “naive-liberal” means is open to interpretation. This quote came from a key organizer at the Cream City Collectives, an anti-authoritarian group in the neighborhood that often promotes an insurrectionary anarchist agenda. With this comes a sense of cynicism and apathy from the Collectives, as the actions taken by other neighborhood organizations seem too gradual or reformist. So, despite the criticism of Riverwest being “naive-liberal” or any other label a person would choose, there is the admission that residents of the neighborhood are working towards what they perceive as favorable social, economic, and/or personal change.

These changes, though, must come from within. Rather than waiting for the current economy to improve, or for the government to help those in need, residents of Riverwest have, unlike many other cities and neighborhoods, taken it upon themselves to improve their own situation. As residents of the neighborhood acutely feel the effects of the current economic crisis, and as Riverwest is viewed as a place where people can come together to accomplish whatever goals they may have, it is only natural that the community would come together to find ways to help others meet their basic needs when the public sector no longer does so. Through a rethinking of how the economy should work for the people, the actions of activists in Riverwest have pushed the neighborhood towards a diverse community economy.

4.2 The Neighborhood as a Site for an Alternative Economy

To say the economy of Riverwest is a community economy, or an economy built on the notion of offering an “alternative” to capitalism, may be a bit of a stretch. However, a number of businesses, community centers, and organizations operate in a way that, if looked at properly, resemble an autonomous and *de facto* community economy. Most commonly, this is accomplished through community ownership of goods and resources, and collective control over decision making. The effects of these characteristics reach far and deep into Riverwest, and I will now explore the neighborhood’s community economy.

4.2.1 Cooperatives

Cooperative economics play a significant role in the development of a community economy (Gibson-Graham, 2006a). Cooperativism, which refers to any combination of ownership between workers, volunteers, consumers, and a board of directors, has a long history in Riverwest and is central to any discussion of a community economy. A number of cooperatives thrive in
Milwaukee with a particular concentration in Riverwest, and they offer one of many interesting alternatives to traditional capitalist economics and management structures.

An interesting parallel can be drawn between the cooperatives of today, and the Milwaukee Idea of the Sewer Socialists from the early 20th century. In review, the Milwaukee idea was to have:

...a two-armed movement – a labor movement with a political arm and with an economic arm. Each arm has its own work to do, and one arm ought not to interfere with the other, although they are parts of the same body. That is the 'Milwaukee Idea.' In the personal union of the workers of both... we find the same men, with the same thoughts, aims and ideals, working in the economic and the political field, thus forming a grand army moving on two roads for the abolition of the capitalist system (Victor Berger as cited in Gurda, 1999 p. 206).

Though the cooperatives of Riverwest are independent from the city’s socialist past, in many ways they operate based upon the same principles. The cooperative structure depends on a similar separation of workers and politicians (in this case a board of directors) who are independent of one another but are both working towards the same goals.

As of October 2011, three cooperatives operate in Riverwest: the Riverwest Cooperative, Outpost Natural Foods, and the Public House. The Riverwest Cooperative and Outpost Natural Foods are both grocery stores with small cafes attached, while the Public House is a bar. I chose to focus my research efforts specifically on the Riverwest Cooperative (opened in November 2011) and the Public House (opened in March 2011) as Outpost Natural Foods (opened in 1970), though originating in Riverwest, has since become a regional chain of grocery stores with a debatable presence in the neighborhood (the store is located on the northern side of Capitol Drive which is the northern boundary of the Riverwest).

The management structure of both the Public House and the Riverwest Cooperative offer interesting insights into non-hierarchical approaches to management and organizational structure. When asked what a cooperative is, each person I interviewed referenced some sort of combination of joint ownership of the business, and a group of people coming together to meet a common need or desire. Joint ownership can mean a number of different things, and take many forms. In many cases cooperatives operate as consumer or member cooperatives, where consumers buy into the cooperative and are given the power to vote on various decisions.
However, the cooperatives of Riverwest differ from this in that they are self-described “operational cooperatives.” According to Grant, a prominent member of the Riverwest Cooperative (and less so the Public House),

… [we are] an operating co-op, not just a consumer co-op, so the members are working and volunteering and taking an active role in the formation and running of the co-op. So you could have a cooperative that is a looser association, but that’s not the kind of cooperative that I’m talking about or am interested in. [We are] community based cooperative, a group of people in the community have gotten together to form a business (interview, 2011).

So, rather than operating as a cooperative that comes together to facilitate consumption, the Riverwest Cooperative serves as a gathering space for the community where anyone who is interested can have a say in the direction of the business, and also contribute whatever time and/or skills they have.

This coming together of residents was entirely a political decision, though for different reasons. According to Vernon, for instance,

… the group of people who started the Riverwest Co-op came in two particular flavors where one group was interested in community and community based activities... Other people were interested in food and food choices, and all things associated with that... and having the control of those food sources be closer to the residents than growing more and more distant from the residents... I think there is possibly even an unconscious group, which is looking to belong to something. To be part of something, rather than a church or a fraternal organization, I think people have a desire to belong to a group. This was a group that organized around principles important to them (interview, 2011).

As varied as these reasons are, the commonalities between them seem to be an emphasis on creating or belonging to a community, and exercising this community’s power over food-related decisions. As the mutual-aid societies and ethnic organizations of Riverwest’s early years are no longer present, residents were looking for and found a way to come together. In so doing, they have opened a space of political decision-making and shaped the character of the neighborhood.

The management structures of both of the Riverwest cooperatives offer a unique take on non-hierarchical organization. The management structure of the Public House is almost a perfect copy of the Riverwest Cooperative’s, so I will refer both as if they are one. As previously mentioned, the Riverwest Cooperative (as well as the Public House) has avoided establishing itself as a consumer cooperative, and instead is an “operational cooperative” that is managed by
workers, volunteers, and consumers. For an annual fee of $20 (or a lifetime fee of $100), consumers may buy a membership to the cooperative and receive a number of benefits. Although members are not the main decision-making or guiding force behind the cooperative, they are still given a voice in the workings of the organization. Annually a general meeting of the membership is called where members can discuss the future directions they would like to see the cooperative take, approve or deny changes to the cooperative’s by-laws, and elect a Board of Directors (Riverwest Cooperative, 2011).

The nine members of the Board of Directors are elected to three year terms, with three seats up for election each year. As they are elected by the membership and representative of their interests, the Board is given more power but remains accountable for their actions and decisions. The jobs and responsibilities given to the Board of Directors revolve primarily around the functioning of the business. These include policy decisions, operation planning, drafting a budget to be approved by the membership, and serving on various committees. Through the use of committees, tasks are further divided into issues related to finance, communication, and building maintenance.

The final political body of the cooperative is the Workers’ Collective, which consists of paid staff members and long-term volunteers. The Workers’ Collective governs the day-to-day work of the store, sometimes in regular consultation with the board of directors. This includes scheduling staff, the hiring/firing of workers (with final approval of the Board required), selecting inventory, pricing inventory, and budgeting for material needs.

In sum, the membership, the Board of Directors, and the Workers’ collective operate on a system of checks and balances where decisions are made by consensus. The goal of such a system is to function as non-hierarchically as possible. For instance, in the store and cafe there are no managers, only co-managers. However, being a co-manager does not give a person power over other workers, as the difference between a co-manager and a worker is that a co-manager has assumed more responsibilities. Decisions that are typically left to someone in a management position are placed in the hands of all the workers, and they must all be in agreement for a decision to be made.
Beyond the political and management structures of the cooperatives, unique approaches towards the economy have also been taken. The Riverwest Cooperative and the Public House both operate as nonprofits, though in name only. This, in part, is due to the agricultural history and traditions of Wisconsin. Over the years cooperatives have made large-scale agricultural operations possible in Wisconsin, as members would buy into a cooperative and in return gain access to shared heavy equipment and machinery that would otherwise be unaffordable. So, as a “cooperative” in Wisconsin has historically referred to and meant an agricultural cooperative, the state’s tax code was written so that a business could not register as both a 501(c)(3) nonprofit and a cooperative.

Despite this legal distinction, the intention of the cooperatives in Riverwest has always been to funnel their profits into local causes instead of personal wealth. Unfortunately the Riverwest Cooperative barely turns enough profit to sustain itself, but what little money is left over after operational expenses is given to various causes around the neighborhood and city. This should come as no surprise as the store’s motto is “Food for people, not profit,” which comes into perspective as you enter the store. In a tiny space the cooperative is able to pack everything a person needs to survive, but with no choice in terms of brands, size, etc. Prices are undeniably lower than other health food and organic stores, but still slightly more expensive than a typical grocery store. A full meal can be purchased at the cafe for around $6.00, and there is enough seating for no more than eight people (unless it is summer and people can eat outside). Therefore, the cooperative meets the needs of both the health-conscious and low-income residents of the neighborhood without exploiting consumers for great profits.

The Public House, on the other hand, was created solely as a money-making institution. The Public House cooperative first took shape in the fall of 2010, and by the following spring the bar had opened its doors becoming the second cooperative bar in the country (the first opened a year earlier in Austin, Texas). The tavern is stocked exclusively with local beers (excluding traditional Milwaukee beers such as Pabst, Miller, Schlitz, and Blatz which are technically local, though belonging to international corporations), and uses what they can of local liquors. By filling the local niche, the Public House has no trouble turning a profit in a neighborhood like Riverwest in a city like Milwaukee.
All profits are circulated into community projects which help the Public House stay true to its nonprofit intentions. Most notably, the cooperative is used as the funding arm for the newly formed Cooperative Alliance in Milwaukee, which promotes the creation of new cooperatives across the city but particularly in Riverwest. This is accomplished through the provision of grants and zero interest loans, information about cooperatives, and knowledge about how to start and operate a cooperative. As the Public House is still less than a year old, though, money is yet to begin pouring into the Alliance. Until then, members continue to dream about their next moves which will likely bring cooperative bakeries and butchers to Riverwest.

Dreaming for something better and different is what lies at the heart of the cooperative movement in Riverwest. In a quest for a world free of domination, oppression, and exploitation, residents have built alternative political and economic systems with the help of their neighbors. Of course, these world-building efforts are not perfect. As the cooperatives strive to be non-hierarchical, it is clear that at least some sort of hierarchy exists within their management structures. Also, several people I interviewed mentioned how painfully grueling consensus based decision-making can be, and that sometimes a little leadership could go a long way. Regardless, valuable lessons can be taken away from the Riverwest cooperatives, the cooperatives continue to contribute to the larger community economy of the neighborhood.

4.2.2 Community Centers and Organizations
Beyond the cooperatives of Riverwest which are also meant to serve as spaces of political and community engagement, two micro-political spaces exist in Riverwest that contribute to the neighborhood’s community economy. The oldest of these spaces is the Cream City Collectives (CCC), having celebrated its five year anniversary in September 2011. The CCC is an anti-authoritarian social center that works towards a greater level of autonomy and self-reliance in the community. In addition to the CCC, the Wright Street Resource Center takes a less political approach to furthering mutual-aid in Riverwest. Each space hosts a number of groups that are actively engaged in the community, and offer a number of resources related to public health, literacy, art, technology, education, and more.

Located across the street from the Riverwest Co-op is the CCC, featuring a beaming black and purple facade. The CCC first opened its doors in the autumn of 2006, and thanks to the cheap rent offered by the sympathetic landlord it has operated on a volunteer and collective basis
for five years. Depending on the day, visitors to the social center are occasionally greeted by an enthusiastic volunteer who would do whatever they could to introduce the newcomer to the space. The main room in the CCC, which hosts most events, consists of a rather large table, room for reading, a small computer lab, and a sizable open space in the middle of it all. The walls are lined from top to bottom with books and zines (short, handmade publications typically made using a photocopier) which are available to anyone on a very loosely enforced honor system. Further towards the back of the building is a kitchen where the Milwaukee chapter of Food Not Bombs used to cook from, and a door which leads to the basement of the collective. The basement is covered in graffiti and is mostly used to host punk and hip-hop concerts, and a room not open to the public can be found which holds screen printing and photo developing equipment. Lastly, there is what can best be described as a pile of bikes which are freely loaned out to anyone interested.

The most prominent collectives which comprise the Cream City Collectives are the Screen Printing collective, the Mathilda Anneke Infoshop, and the Gallery. Each week the collectives and anyone else who is interested come together for a meeting and discussion on how to best operate the CCC. Like at the cooperatives, decisions are made on a consensus basis, and everyone is given a turn to speak.

For the most part these meetings consist of a small group of close friends who, for lack of a better term, were the founders of the CCC. Though this is problematic in terms of keeping the space viable and functional over the years, recent events have brought new interest in the CCC from the outside. With the events that unfolded during the winter and spring of 2011 in Wisconsin politics, there was a massive upsurge in political activism across the state. The University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee (UWM) campus was no exception, and on February 17th, 2011 4,000 students walked out in protest against Governor Scott Walker’s proposed policies (Tolan, 2011). Beyond the walkout, the theater building on campus was taken over by students and successfully occupied for 66 days, making it at the time the longest student occupation in American history. The UWM Anti-Authoritarian organization, which has existed for several years, maintained a strong presence with the CCC at these events, and helped to bring new faces to the CCC.
For much of the spring and summer of 2011, these events provided the impetus for many of the CCC’s actions. Regular discussions were held on topics of austerity, general strikes, occupation, protest, and other forms of resistance against the political and economic climate in Wisconsin at the time. Politics aside, the CCC also regularly hosts workshops with topics ranging from raising ducks in the city to file sharing over the Internet, and other events such as movie screenings and the occasional vegan potluck. Although the CCC was founded on explicitly political principles, those principles do not define its objectives. Above all else the collective and its space are meant to bring people together to explore different ways of meeting their social and cultural needs.

Another prominent space for community organizing in Riverwest is the Wright Street Resource Center (WSRC), which opened its doors in the fall of 2010 and continues to be a work in progress. Upon entering the building, a large and slightly run-down meeting room comes into view which is sparsely decorated and dimly lit. One wall is lined with antiquated computers, and another with piles of brochures and fliers. As one walks through the building, various construction sites and offices can be seen. The WSRC is host to multiple organizations which rent out office and store front space including the Milwaukee Network for Social Change (MNSC), the Riverwest Health Initiative, the Riverwest Neighborhood Association, the Free Store, and the Milwaukee Area Time Exchange.

When asked about the purpose of the WSRC, one of the primary organizers of the space described it as “...[building] community resilience through social and economic networks, through the exchange of material goods and services, neighbor to neighbor, and connecting people with resources from around the neighborhood and city.” Much like the neighborhood of Riverwest, then, the WSRC serves as a crucible where people can come together to meet their various needs. This function plays out most clearly through the efforts of the MNSC and their free store, as well as the Milwaukee Time Exchange, which are the two founding groups of the WSRC.

Prior to the opening of the resource center, MNSC was regularly hosting free markets in public spaces, churches, or whatever else was available at the time. These free markets would serve as temporary stores where people could find donated clothing, books, toys, and other goods at no cost. However, it was clear that the MNSC’s free markets would be more helpful if they
became a permanent operation rather than an occasional one that was constantly changing locations. After the WSRC opened, the Free Store was established and is open most days of the week provided that volunteers are available. Also, once the Free Store had opened, the CCC donated all of the items from their less successful Really, Really Free Market to help the store better serve its customers. In so doing, a permanent and entirely noncapitalist market was created in Riverwest. Through the use of volunteer labor and the exchange of goods without the attachment of any monetary value, the Free Store has attempted to stand outside the capitalist market (though, one must still pay rent) and propose an alternative to the system from which it has separated.

The efforts of the Milwaukee Time Exchange have also furthered the cause of noncapitalist economics in Riverwest. The Time Exchange belongs to a larger international movement of “time banking” where members are able to exchange services using time as currency. According to the founder of Time Exchange, the purpose of the organization is to “[build] social networks so that [people] could exchange services with one another. That is the basic mission of time banking, building community and community resilience by establishing these reciprocal relationships with neighbors and organizations without having to utilize cash.” In essence, the time exchange was created to facilitate exchanges of services by recording the amount of time that was given and received.

As of November 2011 there were over 400 members of the Time Exchange, with slightly more than half living in Riverwest alone. To become a member of the group, a person must fill out an application which is automatically approved. On this application, the prospective member checks off various “skills & needs” that serve as their entry to the world of time banking. This checklist is broken down into various categories such as transportation, education, home repair, and more before getting more specific with options such as counseling, plumbing, and legal work. Once a person becomes a member of the Time Exchange, they attend an orientation where an individual online time banking account is created. This account is used to post and browse advertisements from other members of the Time Exchange, as well as to record the amount of hours saved and spent on labor.

The possibilities for what can be contributed or taken from the Time Exchange are seemingly endless. Services range from haircuts to home painting, and cooking lessons to sailing
on Lake Michigan. Of course, some of these services require a greater level of training or experience than others, but the Time Exchange treats all labor as being equal. If a member contributed two hours of his or her time labor intensive home repair, it would be treated the same as a person contributing two hours of pet care. No hierarchy of labor exists. Every hour that a person contributes to the time bank is equal to that of their peers.

The establishment of the Milwaukee Time Exchange has created a social and economic network of ordinary people that are actively engaged in a noncapitalist market. In so doing, it can be said that Marx’s famous quote “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need” has come to life. Members contribute whatever time and skills they can offer, and receive in return what they cannot provide for themselves.

A final organization that is worth mentioning is Transition Milwaukee. Transition Milwaukee (or Transition for short) is part of the international Transition movement that is working to build communities that are able to respond to looming oil shortages and the climate crisis. Though Transition does not operate or own a single space in the community, their efforts and objectives clearly take a spatial approach to reinterpreting urban land use. Most of Transition’s attention has been given to the neighborhood of Riverwest, although the movement operates at a much larger scale in Milwaukee and elsewhere.

In the terms of a community economy, the objectives of the Transition movement run counter to traditional ideologies related to the market, development, and modernization. However, that is not to say that TM is anti-progress. In many ways TM is working to reincorporate and adopt practices from the past in order to create a more ecologically sound and economically local city. In so doing, sustainable development is seen as a number of small and practical steps that anyone can do to achieve potentially large results (Healy & Graham, 2008).

Perhaps Transition’s greatest successes have been related to urban agriculture. Thanks in part to the efforts of Transition Milwaukee, the city of Milwaukee has voted to allow both the raising of chickens and bees on private property within city limits. Several vacant lots throughout Riverwest have also been converted into community gardens, and consulting is freely provided to those who would like to transform their yards into vegetable gardens. Much of the drive for the expansion of community gardens has come from the Victory Garden Initiative, a counterpart
to Transition Milwaukee. Once or twice a year the Victory Garden Initiative, named for self-reliant gardens that were encouraged during the World Wars, holds a Victory Garden Blitz where large numbers of volunteers build and install gardens at homes, businesses, and public buildings (Herzog, 2009).

Through these efforts, Transition Milwaukee makes several strong contributions to the community economy of Riverwest. By supplying the neighborhood of Riverwest with multiple community spaces for vegetable gardens, Transition is able to bring a greater degree of economic autonomy to the neighborhood. Of course, the efforts of Transition Milwaukee go far beyond the boundaries of Riverwest, but that is beyond the scope of this thesis. Regardless, their role in shaping the character and economy of Riverwest is without question.

As I have shown, the current economic crisis faced by Riverwest’s residents has brought people closer together in order to help meet some of their most basic needs. Through the grassroots actions of the Wright Street Resource Center, the Cream City Collectives, Transition Milwaukee, the neighborhoods numerous cooperatives, and other organizations, people have come together to share whatever knowledge and materials they can offer during times of austerity. However, that is not to say that these efforts are a valid replacement for what the state has taken away. Rather, they should be seen as an honest effort by residents to take back control of the economic and political systems that have left them behind.

5. The Uncertain Future of Riverwest
A strong neighborhood identity in Riverwest has led to the expansion of a community economy at the local level. In a sense, this identity is seen as a historical continuation of a Riverwest and Milwaukee of old. Historically Milwaukee was a stronghold for American socialism, as it was the largest American city to ever elect a socialist mayor and it even sent a socialist to the United States House of Representatives. Riverwest, on the other hand, is a neighborhood that has been in a state of constant flux. Passing from the hands of wealthy Germans to working class Germans and Poles, who eventually made way for an influx of Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and young college students.

The current identity of Riverwest is one that represents a diverse population where people of all walks of life are openly accepted into the neighborhood. In addition, part of the Riverwest
identity is that the neighborhood is host to a high level of political activism, almost exclusively from the left, which is unique to most cities. As Schmidt (2008) contends, the practices that first produced the meaning that Riverwest has today are in a process of continually reproducing the neighborhoods own identity. However, I take issue with this argument which calls for reflection on both my own and Schmidt’s work.

Schmidt’s paper implies that a single identity exists in Riverwest; that of the counter-cultural activist which I too have identified. However, identities are never all-inclusive, and this particular identity highlights some of the complex and hypocritical power relations that exist in the neighborhood. It is true that the activist identity exists in Riverwest, but the fact of the matter is that it as an identity largely held and propagated by white middle class residents. In saying that the neighborhood is diverse, then, the neighborhood’s residents are able to give themselves a pat on the back as they look around the meetings of the Cream City Collectives, the Wright Street Resource Center, Transition Milwaukee, or even the Riverwest Neighborhood Association and notice that the composition of those in attendance is almost always vanilla white. One slogan that frequently appears across the neighborhood says that “Diversity is our strength.” However, as one nearly lifelong resident and activist in Riverwest described to me, it is more likely that “Diversity is our excuse.”

As Martin (2003b) argued, the construction of a neighborhood identity blurs very real divisions of race, class, and gender which is clearly the case in Riverwest. What might a more inclusive identity look like, though? Riverwest is truly a diverse neighborhood, but even that description is not without its faults. As diverse as the neighborhood is, an extremely high level of segregation exists both in terms of where people live and who they associate with. This made it extremely difficult to branch out from the activist network that I became involved in. As a snowball method of recruitment for interviews was employed, I continually found myself interviewing the same types of people in what many claimed was the most diverse neighborhood in the state and/or country. Some may argue that this is a shortcoming of my research, which may be true, but I also believe it highlights an often overlooked reality in Riverwest: that despite all the talk of diversity, the neighborhood is probably just as segregated, if not even more so, as it is diverse. Clearly the white middle class sets the agenda and discourse in the neighborhood, and the guise of “diversity” is used to compensate for the guilt felt by the white and more progressive
residents of Riverwest. Despite the attempts to create a more economically just and integrated neighborhood, the minority population in Riverwest probably does not fare much better than elsewhere in the city. The excuse of diversity hides these shortcomings and allows self-described activists to remain ignorant and passive towards the more structural problems within the neighborhood. It creates the “naive-liberal” mentality that others have criticized before.

Although the diverse/activist neighborhood identity only represents a portion of the neighborhood, it has still had a significant influence on Riverwest. It is my belief that the activist identity shared among some of the residents of Riverwest has made a significant contribution to the creation of a community economy at the neighborhood level. Again, this community economy is nowhere near a full representation of the neighborhood’s economy, but it is there and growing. Through the efforts of the various cooperatives, community centers, and organizations that are present in Riverwest, real alternatives to a capitalist economy play out on a daily basis.

Central to J.K. Gibson-Graham’s (2006b) presentation of the community economy is the continual process of becoming. A community economy is never fully realized nor is it a means to a specific end. Rather, community economies should be looked at as a call for experimentation with noncapitalist possibilities. The activists of Riverwest are continually pushing their local economy in new directions, and opening up new economic and political possibilities that are a step towards a world free of exploitation and hierarchy.

With that said, the future of Riverwest remains to be seen. Although it is not appropriate to refer to Riverwest as a gentrifying neighborhood, the prospect of gentrification is very possible in the years to come. The neighborhood has remained relatively the same since the 1970s when the old immigrant population began to die off, their children moved out, and young college students and refugees from urban renewal projects moved in. However, as the northern boundary of the neighborhood transformed into a commercial strip of chain retailers and restaurants, the southern boundary was overtaken by condominium development that spread north from Milwaukee’s city center. Since these changes have occurred on the periphery of the neighborhood, real estate values in Riverwest remain affordable, but east of the neighborhood values have been skyrocketing. If this trend continues, large numbers of university students and other young people will be pushed out of Milwaukee’s East Side and will most likely displace Riverwest’s most vulnerable communities, namely the African Americans and Puerto Ricans.
The forces of gentrification are not only a threat to the so-called diversity of Riverwest, but also its activist identity. An increase in the student population could result in houses being bought up and converted into multi-unit rentals, which would ultimately send real estate values skyrocketing, something Riverwest has already encountered once in the last 10 years (Sam, interview, 2011). Condominium development is already being pushed in the neighborhood, finding varying degrees of success (Daykin, 2012a; 2012b). The poorest, typically black, residents would be the first to leave Riverwest with others to follow. The rents that various groups pay to operate community centers would also increase, which further exasperates many of the financial problems these groups face. Riverwest’s identity and community economy, as imperfect as they may be, will soon face serious challenges and likely change in unforeseen ways. The unique population and political activism that make Riverwest Riverwest may soon disappear.
6. Bibliography


## Appendix A: Research Informants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Relevance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trevor</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Neighborhood resident, member of CCC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vernon</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Neighborhood resident, founder of the Riverwest Co-op.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Resident, board member of the Public House.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Resident, founder of Time Exchange/WSRC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Resident, member of the Public House/ Riverwest Co-op.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Resident, president of Neighborhood Association.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Organizer for Transition Milwaukee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Resident, organizer for Transition Milwaukee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Transgender</td>
<td>Resident, volunteer at the CCC and Public House.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Resident, member of the Riverwest Co-op.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Interview Schedule

1. Can you start by telling me how long you have been in Riverwest, what first brought you here, and what you are currently up to in the neighborhood?
2. Can you describe Riverwest for me?
3. Do you think there is something especially unique about Riverwest when compared to the rest of Milwaukee, or other places you have lived?
4. What changes have you noticed in the neighborhood throughout your time here?
5. What challenges do you see for Riverwest in the future? What positive do you see, or hope to see, in Riverwest’s future?
6. Are you involved in any organizations in the neighborhood? If yes, what do you hope to accomplish with this?
7. Can you give me more detail about [whatever organization the person is involved with]?
8. How long have you been involved? What has the organization been like over time?
9. What about the political and economic structures?
10. Are you involved with anything else?
11. Do you see these organizations as sustainable, or do they face a lot of challenges?
12. Is there anything else you would like to add?